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'We are turning cursive letters into knives': the synthesis of the written word, sound and action in riot grrrl cultural resistance

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Chapter 5

‘We are turning cursive letters into knives’ :

The Synthesis of the Written Word, Sound and Action in Riot Grrrl Cultural

Resistance¹

Julia Downes

In spring 2007, I was writing a chapter on riot grrrl histories for *Riot Grrrl Revolution Girl Style Now!*², volunteering at Ladyfest Leeds and the DIY feminist collective Manifesta, and playing drums in the all-girl band, Fake Tan. At that time there was little information about riot grrrl, especially riot grrrl in the UK, and I made it my doctoral mission to find its protagonists and see if they would be willing to share their stories with me.³ Riot grrrl seemed like a moment from which I could make sense of what my friends and I were trying to create in the UK: a DIY queer feminist community of fanzines, music, art and culture. Discovering artefacts and experiences of riot grrrl was addictive. Simultaneously doing and researching contemporary DIY feminist culture enabled me to see the interconnections of the written word and music in riot grrrl and contemporary queer feminist cultures. The written word, in its many guises, as manifestos, lyrics, band names, fliers, posters, notebooks and

¹ Bikini Kill ‘Bloody Ice Cream’, *Reject All American* (Kill Rock Stars KRS 260, 1996) [LP]. Lyric cited with permission of Kathleen Hanna.

² See Julia Downes, ‘Riot Grrrl: The Legacy and Contemporary Landscape of DIY Feminist Cultural Activism’, in Nadine Monem (ed.) *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* (London, 2007), pp. 12-49.

³ See Julia Downes, ‘DIY Queer Feminist (Sub)cultural Resistance in the UK’, Unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Leeds, 2009) < <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2383>>

fanzines, is an integral part of the musical moments of riot grrrl. Riot grrrl critiqued and used language in provocative ways to encourage viewers, readers and listeners to shift their subjectivity and take action. Music performances – fused with sound, affect, bodies, words – helped construct radical subjectivities and cultural acts. This connection between the written word and music in riot grrrl is the focus of this chapter, which addresses the following questions: What work did words do? What did music add to the written word? What decisions were made in the creation, circulation and performance of riot grrrl music and writing?

Previous academic attention has often focussed on the role of fanzines in riot grrrl and contemporary transnational feminist communities.⁴ In many respects this focus has depended on what has been preserved and what (and who) is accessible to researchers. However the donation of riot grrrl ephemera gathered in my research to The Women's

⁴ For recent work on this see Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York, 2006), pp. 51-89 and 135-87; Kristen Schilt and Elke Zobl, 'Connecting the Dots: Riot Grrrls, Ladyfests, and the International Grrrl Zine Network', in Anita Harris (ed.), *New Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism* (London, 2008), pp. 171-92; Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York, 2009); Red Chidgey, 'Free, Trade: Distribution Economies in Feminist Zine Networks', *Signs*, 35:1 (2009): 28-37; Elke Zobl 'Cultural Production, Transnational Networking, and Critical Reflection in Feminist Zines', *Signs*, 35:1 (2009): 1-12; Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth, "'We ARE the Revolution": Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing', *Women's Studies*, 41:2 (2012): 136-57; and Red Chidgey, 'Reassess Your Weapons: The making of feminist memory in young women's zines', *Women's History Review* (2013): 1-15.

Library in 2012, now held at the London School of Economics⁵, joins a growing legitimization of riot grrrl as feminist history within institutions including The Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University and Barnard Library at Barnard College.⁶ Of course, riot grrrl never stays obediently on the page or settles nicely into a coherent definition or historical narrative. History shifts depending on who makes it and what is available to make it from. This growing acceptance of riot grrrl fanzines and ephemera within institutions, alongside the problematisation of riot grrrl nostalgia and historiography, presents opportunities to understand riot grrrl in complex and critical ways.⁷ In this chapter I build on my previous research and explain riot grrrl as a synthesis of contested sonic, spatial and linguistic practices. I used newly accessible archival material to trace the cultural scavenging

⁵ For more information about The Women's Library at the London School of Economics and Politics

<<http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collections/featuredCollections/womensLibraryLSE.aspx>>

⁶ See Jenna Freedman, 'Grrrl Zines in the Library', *Signs*, 35:1 (2009): 52-9; Kate Eichhorn, 'DIY Collectors, Archiving Scholars, and Activist Librarians: Legitimising Feminist Knowledge and Cultural Production since 1990', *Women's Studies*, 39:6 (2010): 622-46; Jenna Freedman, 'Self-Publication with Riot Grrrl Ideals: Zines ≠ Vanity Press Publications', in Kelly Wooten and Liz Bly (eds.), *Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21st Century* (Los Angeles, 2012), pp. 13-22; Kate Eichhorn, 'Archiving the Movement: The Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library and Special Collections', in Wooten and Bly *Make Your Own History*, pp. 23-37; Lisa Darms (ed.) *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York, 2013).

⁷ See Mimi T. Nguyen, 'Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 22:2-3 (2012): 173-96.

and ideological, musical and artistic decision making to tell a nuanced story of the ‘radical political imaginary’ of riot grrrl.⁸ I investigate what music added to the distinctive writing practices in riot grrrl to look at how words, as lyrics, combined with sound to create transformative performances that, for many, still resonate. Finally, I explore the disappointment and political depression when revolution girl style now struggled to be realised in everyday life.

Origins

The established narrative of riot grrrl centres on two integral riot grrrl chapters in the US cities of Olympia (Washington State) and Washington, DC, and features a set of high profile characters: Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail of Bikini Kill (band and fanzine) and Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman of Bratmobile and *Girl Germs* fanzine. The chapters existed within an independent infrastructure nurtured by institutions and projects such as Evergreen Community College, K Records, Positive Force and Dischord records. Riot grrrl emerged as a tangible term within the summer of 1991, nicknamed ‘Revolution Summer’.⁹

Word about riot grrrl slowly spread in the UK as K Records mailing order catalogues arrived in the hallways and on the doormats of a small group of indie pop music enthusiasts.¹⁰ The Washington DC-based Nation of Ulysses UK tour also meant that ideas of

⁸ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London, 2009), p. 49.

⁹ See Melissa Klein, ‘Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community’, in Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (eds.), *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis and London, 1997), pp. 207-25.

¹⁰ Julia Downes, ‘Riot Grrrl: The Legacy and Contemporary Landscape of DIY Feminist Cultural Activism’

riot grrrl and tongue-in-cheek youth liberation ideologies reached members of the band Huggy Bear and fanzine writer Karren Ablaze. The idea of riot grrrl enabled a shift in this community who were either already engaged in, or inspired to create, fanzines, music, art, meetings, events and record labels with a specific feminist and/or youth liberation agenda. In the UK the performance of 'herjazz' on the Channel Four TV programme *The Word* on 12 February 1993¹¹, along with the Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill tour that followed in March 1993, consolidated riot grrrl as a tangible idea in a British context, attracting media attention (often negative) from those outside the boundaries of this indie pop community.¹²

Thanks to projects such as Seattle based Experience Music Project¹³, and events such as Ladyfest, over the past thirteen years riot grrrl has experienced a growing resurgence of interest.¹⁴ In popular culture and academic circles riot grrrl has been appropriated as many

¹¹ *The Word*, (1993). [TV programme] Planet 24 Productions & Rapido Television Limited: Channel 4. The performance is also available to watch on YouTube

<<http://youtu.be/lfP5HNvsWAo>>

¹² See Anne Barrowclough, 'Save the World? Not a hope, Grrrls', *Daily Mail* (27 March 1993): 27; Hester Matthewman, 'Rock Against Men is Music to the Riot Grrrls' Ears', *The Independent* (14 March 1993): 7; John Poole, 'I Brave the Riot Girls', *Daily Star* (9 July 1993): 15, 24.

¹³ The Experience Music Project is a non-profit museum based in Seattle, Washington. For more information visit <http://www.empmuseum.org> or the YouTube channel

<http://youtu.be/_q8_1ZcSwRo>

¹⁴ See Elke Zobl, 'Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!' *Peace Review*, 16:4 (2004): 445–452; Schilt and Zobl 'Connecting the Dots'; Elizabeth K. Keenan, 'Who Are You Calling "Lady?"': Femininity, Sexuality, and Third-wave Feminism', *Journal of Popular Music*

different things: a new feminism, a subcultural identity or style, a punk music genre and part of ‘women in rock’ history.¹⁵ There have also been attempts to tell the ‘true’ story of riot grrrl in books and film.¹⁶

Beyond identity

Studies, 20:4 (2008): 378-401.

¹⁵ For work situating riot grrrl within third wave feminism, see Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York, 2000). On riot grrrl as a subcultural identity, see Doreen Marie Piano, ‘Resisting Subjects: DIY Feminism and the Politics of Style in Subcultural Production’, in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-subcultures Reader* (Oxford and New York, 2004), pp. 253-68; and Kristen Schilt, “‘Riot Grrrl Is ...’: Contestation over Meaning in a Music Scene’, in Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson (eds.), *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. (Nashville, 2004), pp. 115–30. On riot grrrl as part of punk cultural history, see Stewart Home, ‘Suck My Left One: Riot Grrrl as the Penultimate Transformation of Punk Rock’, in Stewart Home (ed.), *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory and Punk Rock* (Hove, 1995), pp. 108-20. On riot grrrl within a ‘women in rock’ historical framework, see Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford and New York, 1998) and Amy Raphael, *Grrrls: Viva Rock Divas* (New York, 1995).

¹⁶ See Kerri Koch (dir.), *Don’t Need You: The Herstory of Riot Grrrl*, (Urban Cowgirl Productions, 2006); Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, (New York, 2010); Marisa Meltzer, *Girl Power: The Nineties Revolution in Music*, (London, 2010); Nadine K. Monem (ed.), *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* (London, 2007); Abby Moser (dir.) *Grrrl Love and Revolution: Riot Grrrl NYC* (Women Make Movies, 2011).

I have argued against the simplistic notion of riot grrrl as either an identity category, a genre of music, or a style.¹⁷ It is more useful to make sense of riot grrrl as a fluid set of contested sonic, spatial and linguistic practices with the aim to incite a radical girl gang into being. Riot grrrl can be understood as diverse practices involving bodies, behaviours, sound, music, writing techniques, imagery and myths. This fluid quality of riot grrrl was emphasised in oral histories and interviews with riot grrrl participants; for example, Delia Barnard, a member of London-based all-girl band Mambo Taxi, recalled a moment when:

Niki from Huggy Bear once said that her way of thinking riot grrrl wasn't what a person was, a person wasn't a riot grrrl, it was more a kind of 'I can do it riot grrrl, like riot, grrrl, go for it do what you wanna do'. I mean the thing is people wouldn't have ever really said that they were riot grrrls anyway, people never said 'I'm a riot grrrl are you a riot grrrl?'¹⁸

This struggle for self-definition is situated in a particular historical, cultural and political context in the early 1990s in US and Western Europe. At this time these strategies attempted to resist the grip of hetero-feminine norms on girls' and young women's lives and feminist

¹⁷ See Julia Downes, 'The Expansion of Punk Rock: Riot Grrrl Challenges to Gender Power Relations in British Indie Music Subcultures', *Women's Studies*, 41:2 (2012): 204-37.

¹⁸ Delia Barnard, oral history recorded by the author (30 September 2006). All quotations from this and subsequent oral histories and interviews were conducted during the author's doctoral research 2006-08 and thereby subject to an informed consent process. All quotations were checked with each interviewee along with a full draft of the chapter for permission to be cited in this chapter prior to publication.

participation.¹⁹ Yet despite the fiercely protective control of information about riot grrrl by its instigators, riot grrrl provokes powerful affective attachments for other, wider constituencies who, ‘identify with riot grrrl as an aesthetic, cultural and political movement that is unique to their generation’.²⁰ In this sense books, films and music projects of particular icons of riot grrrl still harbour the potential to ‘go viral’.²¹ At least two accounts of riot grrrl circulate: the private, personal story of a small, closed community of cultural makers, alongside a narrative about widespread DIY feminism accessible to, and created by, the self-selecting public. Kathleen Hanna has reflected on riot grrrl’s contradictory status as a fluid widespread idea, but also an idea that only a small number of people ultimately had control over:

We wanted to stay small because we wanted to develop what we were doing before it was picked apart by the media, our parents and everyone else. We also watched what fame did to some of our close friends, and didn’t want to get into drugs or lose each other in the shuffle of attention. We were into youth culture and believed in the power of minutes and moments as much as we believed in books and music. Because of that we were guarded in terms of letting others frame what we were doing.²²

¹⁹ Julia Downes, ‘Introducing the All-Girl Band: Finding the Comfort in Contradiction’, in Julia Downes (ed.) *Women Make Noise: Girl bands from Motown to the Modern* (Twickenham: 2012), pp. 7-16.

²⁰ Kate Eichhorn, ‘Archiving the Movement’, p. 24.

²¹ See Sini Anderson (dir.) *The Punk Singer: A Film about Kathleen Hanna*, (Opening Band Films, 2013).

²² Kathleen Hanna, email interview with the author (22 January 2008).

In a sense, archives enable riot grrrl instigators to retain some control over who gets to access their personal documents and frame what is knowable about riot grrrl. The Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University is not a public browsing library. Access is dependent on using the collection for research, although the nature of research does not need to be approved.²³ Items are made available in a reading room with strict regulations regarding handling and photography, and the size and quality of collections vary. Therefore, what is knowable about riot grrrl is restricted to who is preserved in the archive as well as what is chosen for inclusion and how it is catalogued. Nonetheless, personal papers and collections of essays, lyrics and articles reveal the diverse cultural influences informing riot grrrl writing and music.

Cultural Scavengers

Johanna Fateman, who along with Kathleen Hanna and JD Samson would later become a member of the band Le Tigre, wrote this astute observation about the role of cultural scavenging in the art practice of her and her feminist peers:

As no one style or form is inherently superior to any other, or more authentic, the logical plan of attack is to scavenge the landfills of Mass Culture, High Art and Whatever Else you can find to make a little Frankenstein-Jekyll-Hyde-Medusa that promises not to stay the same ... To reject one's culturally predetermined role, to look at the limited range of fucked-up images in circulation of your "type"

²³ One strategy employed to make the collection more accessible to the public involved Senior Archivist Lisa Darms with Kathleen Hanna and Johanna Fateman collaborating on a book published by The Feminist Press: Lisa Darms (ed.) *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York, 2013).

(race/ethnicity/gender/class background/sexuality) and say: I am not going to play that, then you are in a position of constructing something for yourself from scratch, faking it, playing it by ear.²⁴

Nothing was off-limits, considered too high or low. Similarly riot grrrl can be considered a deliberate and conscious pillaging of literature, theory, art, history and popular culture in a struggle to articulate subversive representations that challenged the status quo. The personal archives of articles collected by Kathleen Hanna exemplify this, and reveal wide-ranging influences including critical theory, popular ‘real crime’ articles, literary and experimental fiction writers, radical feminist history, filmmakers, fashion, performance artists, newspaper coverage of violent crimes against women, feminist articles on pornography alongside Playboy articles, and women’s acts of disobedience against the art world, film and the sex industries.²⁵ Hanna’s papers highlight a conflicted relationship with the limitations of a masculinist symbolic order upon a radical imaginary. For example, Hanna’s early fanzine *Fuck Me Blind* challenges the universal, authoritarian and detached logics embedded in the

²⁴ Johanna Fateman, *Synthetic Kids, Visions of Sugarplums*, 1995-98; in Kathleen Hanna Papers 1988-2005; MSS 271; Series I: Filing Cabinet Files; Box 10; Folder 17; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries. All subsequent archival materials from The Riot Grrrl Collection are cited with permission of their authors with the exception of an extract from *Sister Nobody*. failed was unable to contact Laura and due to its self-published nature and public circulation I chose to cite it. I chose not to publish materials from personal correspondence from persons that I could not contact for permission.

²⁵ Articles (undated); Kathleen Hanna Papers 1998-2005; MSS 271; Series I: Filing Cabinet Files; Box 2; Folders 29-30; Box 3; Folders 1-9; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

written word:

The accepted mechanics of writing i.e. paragraphs, indents, not good to use “i” instead it is accepted to pretend that you know and can speak for everyone, use “one” instead to be neutral (not personal). If used I must be capitalised – assert authority – more understandable.

Note – remember to always capitalise God.²⁶

In these documents, images of monkeys from the Maslow experiment²⁷ and references to Tissa the monkey boy, a feral child who was captured and ‘civilised’ in 1973, represent recurrent themes of violent conditioning, the commodification of emotion, and the dissociation of desire. In Hanna’s *Dear Daddy* fanzine, Tissa is used as an example of how radicalism is incomprehensible to the dominant logics of mathematics, language and laws. Hanna wrote, ‘he wouldn’t make sense how they wanted him to ... When they finally got Tissa to write he wrote the same thing over and over again’.²⁸

Hanna also collected short stories by the experimental writer Kathy Acker, along with book reviews, essays and obituaries about Acker.²⁹ An obituary shared by Hanna with

²⁶ Kathleen Hanna, *Fuck Me Blind* (1988); Kathleen Hanna Papers 1988-2005; MSS 271; Series I: Filing Cabinet Files; Box 1, Folder 4; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁷ Abraham Harold Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*. (New York, 1954)

²⁸ Kathleen Hanna, *Dear Daddy* (undated); Kathleen Hanna Papers 1988-2005; MSS 271; Series I: Filing Cabinet Files; Box 1, Folder 1; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁹ Kathleen [Hanna], 1994-2000; Johanna Fateman Riot Grrrl Papers 1991-2006; MSS 258; Series III: Correspondence; Box 1, Folder 64; Fales Library and Special Collections.

Fateman celebrated Acker as an innovator, emphasising her tactic to ‘appropriate canonical texts from a male-dominated tradition and reinvent them as eroticised play things within the confines of elaborate linguistic games’.³⁰ Acker’s work influenced Hanna’s early spoken word performances and fanzines.³¹ There, Hanna engages with experiences of incest, abuse and violence, exploring the woman/daughter/girl-as-martyr whose complicity with abuse is rewarded with social power and popularity. This exploration exposes the contradictions inherent in a feminine masquerade that feels pleasure within oppressive abusive acts and struggles to disentangle pleasure from pain. Acker’s influence alerts us to the ugly, oppressive and violent aspects of girlhood and patriarchal characters that thread through Hanna’s early written and spoken work. In an unpublished essay, Hanna defends engagement with such oppressive ideas: ‘Just cuz someone is reading or looking at or listening to something that is “fucked up” (i.e. has oppressive elements to it) don’t assume they are accepting it, loving it etc. ... they may be trying to climb in bed with what they hate in order to render it meaningless, deprogram themselves or in some other way radically engage’.³² Therefore, in this historical moment, riot grrrl was a conscious scavenging of literary, artistic and theoretical ideas concerning the limitations of the language and the male gaze on cultural

³⁰ Kathleen [Hanna], 1994-2000; Johanna Fateman Riot Grrrl Papers 1991-2006; MSS 258; Series III: Correspondence; Box 1, Folder 64; Fales Library and Special Collections.

³¹ See Hanna, *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* (undated); Kathleen Hanna Papers 1988-2005; MSS 271; Series I: Filing Cabinet Files; Box 1, Folder 6-7; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

³² Kathleen Hanna, *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, ‘The Scene’* (undated) [1 of 5]; Kathleen Hanna Papers 1988-2005; MSS 271; Series I: Filing Cabinet Files; Box 4, Folder 7; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

articulations of genders and sexualities. Riot grrrl became a series of experiments, including literary or textual experiments, put into action to critique dominant orders and develop creative tactics for girls, women and feminists to intervene in and disrupt these logics. The intimate circles of letters and fanzines exchanged between women and girls evince crucial writing practices that provoked action in riot grrrl. Yet, as in other attempts to disseminate feminist knowledge, the manifesto also became a way for individuals to conjure strong affect and memories, and define and redefine the ideological, aesthetic and political goals of riot grrrl.³³

Manifestos were written by Erika Reinstein in *Fantastic Fanzine* #3, Molly Neuman in *riot grrrl* #4, Kathleen Hanna in *riot grrrl* #2, Karren Ablaze in *Ablaze! #12*, and by multiple writers in compilation fanzines like riot grrrl Olympia's, *What is Riot Grrrl Anyway?*. These manifestos, written in 1991 and 1992, utilise the iconic and emotive power of the manifesto to both consolidate and trouble riot grrrl's definitive political position. In her oral history, Ablaze recounted the feeling of staying up late drinking coffee to write her riot grrrl manifesto, a destructive aesthetic force querying existing relations and norms: 'We have specific methods of working, notions of time, space and other resources'.³⁴ The language of riot grrrl spoke of destroying the old social order and of global revolution. For instance, take Laura's description of the first riot grrrl convention held in Washington DC in 1992 in her fanzine *Sister Nobody* #3:

We are women who know that something is happening – something

³³ See Felicity Colman, 'Notes on the Feminist Manifesto: The Strategic Use of Hope', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 14:4 (2010): 377.

³⁴ Karren Ablaze, *Ablaze! #10* (self-published fanzine, 1992). Fanzine cited with permission of Karren Ablaze.

that seems like a secret right now, but won't stay like a secret for much longer. I believe we are in the midst of an awakening. This awakening is not sudden, but steeped in blood and tears and sweat of centuries of women's fight for truth in a world ruled by lies. This weekend is the first riot grrrl convention and somehow I know it will be a pivotal point in a major shift in american culture. The revolution girl style now is for fucking real and I believe it will impact the world in ways even we who are closest to it right now can't conceive.³⁵

These texts were meant to make readers feel empowered, take action and identify with radical subject positions. Michal Cupid (Michal William) recalled the impact that riot grrrl writing had upon his sense of agency and possibility:

It's to the point, and has such an edge to it, and such a poetry – it's not formulaic, and it's not academic at all, but it's so smart and so sure of itself – it makes you just want to jump up and run around screaming ... It creates this vision, and you can kind of see things in this way that's been spun by how they've written about it ... It's a really effective way of inspiring people – to build something up, to maybe bigger than it was, and make us want to reach for that!³⁶

Words + Guitar

³⁵ Laura, Correspondence: Filed under H [2 of 2] (undated); Molly Neuman Riot Grrrl Collection; MSS 289; Series I: Correspondence; Box 1, Folder 11; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

³⁶ Michal William, interview with the author (16 September 2007).

So, the next question is why form punk bands? Why use punk music sounds, spaces and performances in riot grrrl? What does music add to the power of the written word? One answer can be found in Hanna's oft-cited conversation with Kathy Acker who advised her to ditch spoken word as more people would listen to her if she were in a band. Bikini Kill fully realised Hanna's intention to use punk praxis as a feminist tool to connect theory, activism and public space. Bikini Kill were first formed in 1990 by Kathi Wilcox, Tobi Vail and Kathleen Hanna who later on were joined by Billy Karren. The band produced two Bikini Kill fanzines in 1991, *Bikini Kill: A Color and Activity Book* and *Bikini Kill: GirlPower*. Hanna's conscious engagement with punk as a medium for feminist performance is captured in her handwritten notes on an essay draft posted to Johanna Fateman:

I was finding space within the fine line between performance art and "fronting" a punk band, to forward feminist experimentation: public space and to test the conceptual limits of that culturally maligned category of expression "female rage". Although I found the question "art or activism" just as boring as I do now, I hoped our shows would offer interesting points of contact between art theory, grassroots activism and punk performance. We had no idea how hungry girls across the country were for what we were trying to do.³⁷

Therefore, in Bikini Kill, Hanna was consciously appropriating punk as a medium to play subtle games with language, the body, affect and public space to provoke a feminist community. This tactic was successful in reaching out people who still share strong affective

³⁷ Kathleen [Hanna], 1994-2000; Johanna Fateman Riot Grrrl Papers 1991-2006; MSS 258; Series III: Correspondence; Box 1, Folder 64; Fales Library and Special Collections.

attachments.³⁸ Punk sound has been astutely described as ‘a multi-sensorial source of material’ that ‘has the potential to open a vital and alternative space of sexuality and performance’.³⁹ Therefore, punk could deliver feminist messages in a didactic fashion to an audience of girls and young women. Hanna crafted lyrics and developed ‘girls to the front’ strategies to directly transform gender dynamics within male dominated punk spaces and physically positioned girls and young women as the target audience.⁴⁰ In opposition to the media stereotype of riot grrrl performers as deluded, angry and violent, Hanna used humour and was very playful in her delivery and performances.⁴¹ Bikini Kill songs plagiarised popular songs, including Whitney Houston’s ‘So Emotional’ and John Lennon’s ‘Give Peace a Chance’.⁴² Hanna engaged in sarcastic vocal games, using her voice to mimic and ridicule characters of the dominant order including the father, mother, daughter, sister, sexual predator and victim. For example, in ‘Suck My Left One’, obedience to the father is derided as Hanna mimics the voice of the mother when she sings:

Mama says:

You have got to be polite girl

³⁸ See the on-going Bikini Kill blog project that encourages fans to contribute their Bikini Kill stories < <http://bikinikillarchive.wordpress.com> >.

³⁹ Elizabeth Stinson, ‘Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance’, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 22:2-3: 279.

⁴⁰ See Julia Downes, ‘The Expansion of Punk Rock’.

⁴¹ Anne Barrowclough, ‘Save the World? Not a hope, Grrrls’; Hester Matthewman ‘Rock Against Men is Music to the Riot Grrrls’ Ears’; John Poole, ‘I Brave the Riot Girls’.

⁴² Bikini Kill, ‘Double Dare Ya’ and ‘Liar’, *Revolution Girl Style Now!* (Self-released audio cassette: 1991).

You have got to be polite
 Show a little respect for your father
 Wait until your father gets home.⁴³

The repetitive sarcastic refrain of ‘fine’ by the daughter in response to ‘mama’ illustrates both defiance and obedience. Articles that Hanna kept illustrate her decisions about how she used her body in Bikini Kill performances. For instance, in her copy of James’ article ‘Hardcore: Cultural Resistance in the Postmodern’, she highlighted the following text: ‘the voyeurism of pornography depends on concealed observation, while here the performers’ self-consciousness allows them the pleasure of exhibitionism ... their blatant self-display releases them from guilt and invites a similarly “shameless gaze” for the spectator’.⁴⁴ Hanna’s work as a stripper, Safeplace volunteer, and interest in anti-censorship feminist debates on pornography all informed her response to the contradictions of female sexuality as contingent on a powerful male spectator. This fuelled a struggle to realise a radical sexuality in punk performance, moving between powerful and vulnerable constructions of female sexuality. Hanna used her body in punk performance – deploying gestures, words and clothing to test dominant ideologies and reach for possibilities of female sexual agency and pleasure. Hanna’s array of gestures in Bikini Kill performances included taking her shirt off to reveal the word ‘Slut’ on her stomach, grabbing her crotch when she repeats the line ‘silence inside of me silence inside’ in ‘Resist Psychic Death’, grabbing her breasts and flashing her backside to the crowd when she opens ‘Li’l Red’ with the lines ‘These are my

⁴³ Bikini Kill, ‘Suck My Left One’, *Revolution Girl Style Now!* (Self-released audio cassette: 1991). Lyrics cited in length with permission of Kathleen Hanna.

⁴⁴ David James, ‘Hardcore: Cultural Resistance in the Postmodern’, *Film Quarterly*, 42:2 (1988): 34.

tits, yeah. And this IS my ass'. Hanna also uses her body to dance and move across the stage swiveling her hips, kicking up her heels, jumping up and down on the spot and whipping her ponytail.⁴⁵ These spectacles of self-display make the viewer/audience member shamelessly aware of their gaze and their problematic complicity in the production of powerful dominant sexual categories imposed upon women's bodies and sexualities.

The musical moments of riot grrrl were transformative for audiences. The filmmaker Lucy Thane, who documented the Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear UK tour in 1993, recalled the power of Bikini Kill performances in her oral history: 'I had such a strong thought of I can hear discord in the electric guitar and the sounds and the shouting but at this other level there's silence like it was just beautiful. There was that thing you get in all music and it could be in all art or nature where you're just in your body you're in the moment and it's just right'.⁴⁶ A music performance can create a feeling of community and provide a glimpse of what a radical society and culture could look and feel like, as Hanna observed: 'concerts create an immediate sense of community. I've found that the only way change occurs is if we taste it for moments and then seek to make it a part of our everyday'.⁴⁷

Many participants felt these new possibilities open up and took action as Layla Gibbon, teenage member of Skinned Teen and author of *Drop Babies* fanzine, emphasised: 'music was the reason I got into riot grrrl, I would not have been interested if it had been a

⁴⁵ Bikini Kill live DVDs; Kathleen Hanna Papers 1988-2005; MSS 271; Series III: Media; Shelf: Media, ID: 271.0038 and 271.0041; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

⁴⁶ Lucy Thane, oral history recorded by the author (13 June 2008).

⁴⁷ Kathleen Hanna, email interview with the author (22 January 2008).

subculture just based on [fan]zines and meetings'.⁴⁸ However infectious riot grrrl rhetoric was, heightened expectations obscured the labour and energy required to realise revolutionary social change for all girls. The everyday intimacies of 'girl love' were also fragile spaces vulnerable to enactments of abusive behaviours and mistakes.

'riot grrrl ate itself'⁴⁹

How can we make our scenes less white both in numbers and ideology? How can we best support/educate & draw from non-punk feminists? Should we? How can we draw up a program (fluctuating) that encompasses race, class and gender relations (species too?) w/out have any be seen as central or MOST PRESSING ... i.e., for expediency sake NOT doing outreach w/ punks of color NOT including music/zines by lesbian punks, NOT having vegan food available at functions etc. ... Anti-racist, speciist, heterosexist, classist work cannot be 'written in' the margins, they MUST BE CENTRAL.⁵⁰

The above text can be found on the first page of 'riot grrrl test patterns', a notebook belonging to Hanna. It is followed by another nine pages of questions, possible projects and actions, potential policies on including boys, the media, and decision-making, to do lists, and a meeting agenda. Yet after this initial burst the notebook is blank: putting into practice riot grrrl rhetoric and manifestos was ambitious and challenging. Despite starting with a question that interrogated exclusion, marginality and whiteness, riot grrrl has been heavily criticised as

⁴⁸ Layla Gibbon, email interview with the author (2 June 2008).

⁴⁹ Allison Wolfe, oral history recorded by the author (3 May 2007).

⁵⁰ Hanna, *Notebook - Riot Grrrl Test Patterns*.

biased towards the interests and needs of white, middle class and heterosexual young women punks.⁵¹ Fanzines by women of colour voiced the racism reproduced within ‘white bread’ riot grrrl and punk communities.⁵² Tensions rose as the everyday labour of women invested in the grassroots organisation of riot grrrl remained hidden in relation to women who were involved in punk bands.⁵³ The open confessional character of riot grrrl workshops, fanzines and meetings became problematic as ‘horizontal oppression’ took place, and the personal collapsed into the political.⁵⁴ Mistakes were made. Particular individuals appropriated and wielded marginal terms and identities to gain personal power in riot grrrl circles. Sometimes racist behaviours were normalised and women of colour were seen as disrupting the safe spaces and histories of riot grrrl with unwarranted anger, despite being pivotal in shaping riot

⁵¹ Mimi T. Nguyen, ‘Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival’; Kristen Schilt, ‘The Punk White Privilege Scene: Riot Grrrl, White Privilege, and Zines’, in Jo Reger (ed.) *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement* (London, 2005), pp. 39-56; Gayle Wald, ‘Just a girl? Rock music, feminism, and the cultural construction of female youth’, *Signs*, 23:3 (1998): 585-610.

⁵² See, for example, *Gunk #4 Complete Copy*, 1993; Ramdasha Bikceem Riot Grrrl Collection 1974-1998 (Bulk 1991-95); MSS 354; Series I: Zines; Sub-series G: Gunk; Box 5, Folder 23; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

⁵³ Many members of punk bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy and Huggy Bear chose to have little involvement with riot grrrl at a grassroots level after its early stages.

⁵⁴ Kathleen Hanna, ‘Three Dimensional Role Model’, Interview (17 February 2010), GRITtv <http://grittv.org/?video=kathleen-hanna-three-dimensional-role-model-2> [accessed 1 May 2013].

grrrl.⁵⁵ In an essay, Hanna reflects on her loss of hope in being part of creating a feminist culture that ultimately lapsed into abusive and oppressive behaviours:

I had come to feminism like a lamb seeking God or something. I had this all or nothing, everything here has to be perfect vs. the outside fucked up world, approach – so when certain folks around me played out their individual psychologies as if they were political dramas and not the straight up abusiveness they actually were (to mask their abusiveness), I felt devastated and demoralised, like everything “politically progressive” was going down the toilet.⁵⁶

With little experience of the complexities of feminist community organisation it became difficult to realise riot grrrl rhetoric in everyday life. Over time, instigators let go of riot grrrl and distanced themselves from harmful situations and fatigue for emotional safety and self-preservation.

Cursive Letters into Knives

The radical political imaginary of riot grrrl synthesised diverse literary, artistic, intellectual and popular cultural resources. Combinations of written words, images and sounds were deployed within a punk paradigm to generate radical subjectivities, to empower young women and girls to become radical cultural producers, and to realise other ways of being and doing in their local communities and wider world. In particular, riot grrrl was a set of

⁵⁵ See Nguyen, ‘Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival’; and Mimi Thi Nguyen Zine Collection, in Collaboration with the People of Color Zine Project 1992-1998; MSS 365; Series I: Zines; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York Libraries.

⁵⁶ Kathleen [Hanna], 1994-2000; Johanna Fateman Riot Grrrl Papers 1991-2006; MSS 258; Series III: Correspondence; Box 1, Folder 64; Fales Library and Special Collections.

experiments set into play in response to the limits of masculinist paradigms in the written word (language), visual arts (male gaze) and punk music scenes (places of male belonging), that simultaneously sought to transform culture and critique harmful binary logics that limited the lives of girls and young women. The written word in its many guises – heard as punk lyrics, scrawled on bodies in performance, and as revolutionary plans in manifestos, fanzines and letters – was central to riot grrrl processes. These processes produced powerful memories and affective attachments to riot grrrl persisting long after bands broke up, instigators ceased their activism, and fanzines fell out of print. The recent riot grrrl revival and establishment of archives have legitimised the attachments many of us have with riot grrrl, despite our distance in time, location and social circles. As a significant, if messy, moment in feminist history, making sense of riot grrrl as action is important if we are to recognise and realise radical subjectivities and feminist cultures in the future.

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